

ON TRACK WITH MDT

June 2002

There has been much talk about U.S. 93 between Evaro and Polson the past year and a half. With three government partners working diligently to expedite the construction process, I thought it was time for an update on this project.

As you probably know, MDT, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) began talking about this project in the early 1980s. The project proceeded through the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process in the early 1990s but ran into a roadblock because of disagreement over the preferred design alternative. As a result, in August 1996, FHWA released a Record of Decision stating, "Before any improvements to U.S. 93 between Evaro and Polson can move forward...a resolution of the differences between (the CSKT and the State) is necessary."

Talks stagnated shortly thereafter, and the stalemate continued until March of 2000, when the firm of Skillings-Connolly, Inc. was hired to lead the negotiation process. Numerous public, Project Oversight Group (POG) and advisory committee meetings were held to provide a forum for discussions and to discover areas of mutual interest in order to develop compromises.

The effort worked so well that CSKT, FHWA and MDT signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) in December of 2000, only nine months after the negotiation team was established. The project received another boost when Governor Judy Martz approved the sale of up to \$125 million in Garvee bonds to expedite the construction process.

Since that time, the Final Environmental Re-evaluation and the Record of Decision have been finalized (November 2001), and the design process has begun for all but the Ninepipe area, which is undergoing a supplemental EIS. The Ninepipe EIS is slated for completion this fall.

In order to expedite the design/construction process, the corridor, excepting Ninepipe, has been divided into eight design segments, with a different firm designing each section of road. Those segments – and the corresponding consultants – are as follows:

1. Evaro to McClure Road (Entranco)
2. McClure Road to North Arlee (Allied Engineering)
3. North Arlee to White Coyote Road (WGM Group)
4. White Coyote Road to South Ravalli (Robert Peccia & Associates)
5. South Ravalli to Medicine Tree (Thomas, Dean & Hoskins)
6. Medicine Tree to Red Horn Road (Stahly)
7. Spring Creek to Minesinger Trail (Carter Burgess)
8. Minesinger Trail to MT 35 (Stelling)

Our goal is to have design complete by the fall of 2003 so that we can begin construction in 2004. Five segments have been given priority (numbers 1, 3, 6, 7 and 8 above). We will be concentrating our right of way acquisition on those sections so that work can proceed in a timely fashion, pending 1) successful purchase of all necessary right of way, and 2) successful application for all necessary permits. Completing the Polson East Project on MT 35 will also be key, as it includes installing the storm drain for Polson Hill. That project is tentatively scheduled for 2003-04.

As with any project, certain roadblocks threaten to derail our progress. The biggest obstacle facing this and other MDT projects is, of course, the pending RABA, or Revenue Aligned Budget Authority, cuts. We won't know the effect of these cuts until Congress finalizes its bill on additional highway obligation authority, but we're hopeful that the cuts will be less than originally projected. In the meantime, we're moving forward with the design and planning process and looking at ways to streamline operations. Like you, we need to stay "on track with MDT."

Dave Galt
Director



Reaching agreement on the preferred design alternative for U.S. 93 from Evaro to Polson, a section of which is pictured here, has taken years. Construction is scheduled to begin in 2004, pending successful resolution of all right of way and permitting issues.